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SUBJECT: RECENT CHILD TRAFFICKING INCIDENTS ON GUINEA'S NORTHERN
BORDERS

REF: BAMAKO 000312

¶1. SUMMARY: (U) Local media reported two alleged child trafficking incidents on Guinea's borders with Mali and Senegal. The first incident involved 22 children being transported to Mali, and the second, 11 children being transported to Senegal. In both cases, Koranic teachers, also known as marabouts, were allegedly taking the children for Koranic studies in neighboring countries. According to Guinean authorities, the marabouts were transporting the children to Mali and Senegal to be exploited into forced labor or begging on the streets. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Information in this cable comes from the Conakry Judicial Police and from two NGOs working to combat child trafficking in Guinea, Save the Children and Sabou Guinea. The cases illustrate the inherent challenges of investigating and prosecuting trafficking cases when parents consent to have their child transported by another adult.

INCIDENT ON GUINEAN-MALIAN BORDER

¶3. (U) This is a follow up to reftel, which highlighted the prevalence of self-described marabouts who promise to provide a Koranic education for children, but instead force the children to work in fields or beg in the streets of Bamako. In March, Radio France International (RFI) reported that five alleged traffickers were arrested near the Malian-Guinean border for transporting 26 children, 22 of whom were from Guinean villages near Siguiri. According to RFI, one of the alleged traffickers was a marabout who was taking the children to Bamako for Koranic studies. The marabout and his four accomplices were arrested by border police in Kita, Mali when they could not provide legal documentation for the children.

¶4. (U) Sabou Guinea, selected by Guinean authorities to return the 22 Guinean children to their villages, reported to the Embassy on their involvement in this incident. Sabou Guinea said that Koranic teacher Drama Malian and his four accomplices are being detained in Kita pending trial by Malian authorities. Sabou Guinea reported that on March 30, they accompanied the children to Santiguiya (9 children), Mankadjan (8 children) and Moussala (5 children) and spoke to the parents of the alleged trafficking victims. The parents reportedly admitted to entrusting their children to the marabout and explained that it is a common practice in their village. The parents added that other children had studied with this marabout in Bamako and had returned safely to the village afterward. In one of the villages, Sabou Guinea reported meeting five alumni of the marabout, each testifying that they had a positive educational experience.

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15. (U) Also in March, Guinee24 (an internet news site) reported that a man was apprehended in Koundara on the Guinean-Senegalese border with eleven children ranging in age from 4 to 12. According to the article, the alleged trafficker, said to be a marabout, was transporting the children to Saint Louins, Senegal for Koranic studies. The children were from Sangaredi, a mining town in the west of Guinea. Guinee24 reported that the alleged trafficker claimed the children were entrusted to him, but he could not provide legal documentation demonstrating parental consent.

16. (U) Save the Children has a project in Sangaredi, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, aimed at combating child trafficking. Per Embassy requests, Save the Children representatives met with the alleged trafficker, the eleven children, the parents of the children and the local authorities. Save the Children reported that the alleged trafficker had permission from the parents to take the children to Senegal for Koranic studies. According to the NGO, because the alleged trafficker had parental consent, the Prefect in Sangaredi determined this was not a case of child trafficking and therefore returned the children to their parents, and released the alleged trafficker.

GUINEAN AUTHORITY'S REACTION TO INCIDENTS

17. (U) ASST POLOFF inquired about these incidents in a meeting with Commissioner Bakary Camara from the Conakry Judicial Police. Mr. Bakary commented on the Guinean-Malian border incident, confirming that the marabout and his accomplices are in prison in Mali. Mr.

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Bakary said that he was awaiting a report from the Malian authorities to determine if further investigation is needed from the Guinean authorities, in order to facilitate the trial in Mali. In regards to the incident on the Guinean-Senegalese border, Mr. Bakary confirmed that the children had been returned to their families in Sangaredi and the alleged trafficker released by local authorities.

18. (U) Mr. Bakary said that local authorities are just beginning to understand that children who are sent to Senegal and Mali for Koranic studies are often subjected to forced labor or begging on the streets. Mr. Bakary said that child trafficking is a major problem on Guinea's northern borders and that he is convinced that every child traveling to Mali and Senegal for Koranic studies is being trafficked for exploitation. Mr. Bakary also expressed his disappointment that the Prefect in Sangaredi released the alleged trafficker without conducting a full investigation.

COMMENT

19. (SBU) Guinean authorities are struggling with differentiating child trafficking from kidnapping. The issue of parental consent only further confuses the issue, making it difficult to prosecute and investigate a trafficking incident. It is unclear whether these examples represent actual trafficking cases, but they do illustrate the challenges faced by NGOs and authorities working to combat trafficking. Asst Poloff will travel to both the Guinean-Senegalese and Guinean-Malian borders in the coming weeks to further investigate child trafficking issues on Guinea's northern border.
END COMMENT.

CARTER